

Whatever Happened to 'We the People'?

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Will our nation continue to stand for the values on which it was founded?

The following is an excerpt from Thom Hartmann's new book, [Cracking the Code: How to Win Hearts, Change Minds, and Restore America's Original Vision](#).

We the people

The traditional American liberal story is the story of We the People.

As Americans, the most important part of our social identity is our role as citizens. To be a citizen means to be part of, and a defender of, the commons of our nation. The water we drink, the air we breathe, the streets we drive on, the schools that we use, the departments that protect us -- these are all the physical commons. And there are also the cultural commons -- the stories we tell ourselves, our histories, our religions, and our notions of ourselves. And there are the commons of our power systems (in the majority of American communities), our health-care system (stolen from us and privatized over the past twenty-five years, our hospitals in particular used to be mostly nonprofit or run by mostly city or county governments), and the electronic commons of our radio and TV spectrum and the Internet.

Most important for citizenship is the commons of government -- the creation and the servant of We the People.

Franklin D. Roosevelt understood this commons. In his "Four Freedoms" speech, he said, "Necessitous men are not free men." Hungry people aren't free people, no matter what you want to call them. Hungry people can't be good citizens: they're too busy taking care of the hungry part of themselves to care about the citizen part.

Republicans don't want to fund FDR's social safety net because they fundamentally do not believe in the concept of We the People collectively protecting all of us in anything other than a military/police way. They don't believe that "the rabble" should run the country. They want big corporations to run the commons of our nation, and they think that the most appropriate role for citizens is that of infantilized consumers -- of both commercial products and commercially produced political packaging.

This is the fundamental debate in our society: Are we a nation of citizens or a nation of consumers? Are we a democracy run by citizens, or are we a corporatocracy that holds consumers locked in dependency by virtue of their consumption?

Consumerism appeals to the greedy and selfish child part of us, the infantilized part that just wants someone else to take care of us. The core message of most commercials is that "you are the most important person in the world." Commercial advertising almost never mentions "we" or "us."

What is at stake today is the very future of our democratic republic. If we accept an identity as fearful, infantilized consumers, we will be acting from our baby part and allowing corporate America and an increasingly authoritarian government to fill the role of a parent part.

The story we are told is that we should surrender all of our power to corporations and just let them govern us because a mystical but all-knowing godlike force called "the free market" will eventually solve all of our problems.

That story fits in very well with the conservatives' other story: that we are children who need to be protected from evil humans; and because corporations are amoral and not human, they are intrinsically and morally superior to evil humans.

To save democracy we must crack that code and bring back the code so well understood by the Founders of this nation: that we're a country of barn-builders, of communities, of intrinsically *good* people who work together for the common good and the common wealth. We begin this process by speaking to the responsible part of us, the part that enjoys being grown up and socially responsible.

The story we have to tell is the story of citizenship derived from our best and most noble parts. It's the story of We the People.

We talk a lot about the features of citizenship, like the right to vote, but we sometimes forget what the benefits are. The main benefit of citizenship is freedom -- not freedom from external or internal dangers (although that is included in the package, it's only *one* of the six purposes listed in the Preamble to the Constitution) that conservatives obsess on, but freedom to think as we want, to pray as we want, to say what we want, and to live as we want to fulfill our true potential as humans (the other *five* things listed in the Preamble).

The question, ultimately, is whether our nation will continue to stand for the values on which it was founded.

Early American conservatives suggested that democracy was so ultimately weak it couldn't withstand the assault of newspaper editors and citizens who spoke out against it, leading John Adams (our second president and our first conservative president) to pass America's first Military Commissions Act-like laws: the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. President Thomas Jefferson, who beat Adams in the "Revolution of 1800" election, rebuked those who

wanted America ruled by an iron-handed presidency that could -- as Adams had -- throw people in jail for "crimes" such as speaking political opinion, and without constitutional due process.

"I know, indeed," Jefferson said in his first inaugural address on March 4, 1801, "that some honest men fear that a republican government cannot be strong; that this government is not strong enough." But, Jefferson said, our nation was "the world's best hope" precisely because we put our trust in We the People.